The complex depiction of society and class in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*
Abstract

Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels have been praised for their depiction of contemporary society and for giving the voiceless working-class a voice. Her two novels Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1854) are referred to as industrial novels, giving a contemporary depiction of nineteenth century England. However, Gaskell did receive contemporary criticism for being biased in her first novel, Mary Barton, by not giving the upper class an adequate and honest depiction. This essay argues that North and South gives a more impartial impression by including a greater complexity with the use of more perspectives and contrasts, and that ultimately this is a response to the critique of Mary Barton. By analysing the mixed genres, the different perspectives of setting and select characters in North and South, and comparing it to Mary Barton, this essay aims to highlight the extensive inherent complexity of North and South. Comparisons between the novels North and South and Mary Barton have been done in earlier journal articles and essays, but never with the focus on the difference in relation to earlier criticism. Therefore this essay could contribute to future research in the sense of suggesting a possible reason for Gaskell’s choice or development in her complex depiction of society.

Keywords: Perspectives; complexity; contemporary criticism; industrialism; class; Mary Barton; North and South
There’s iron, they say, in all our blood,
And a grain or two perhaps is good;
But his, he makes me harshly feel,
Has got a little too much of steel.
- Anon (Gaskell 2012, 101)

During the Victorian era, the industrial revolution was blooming throughout England and rapid changes in people’s lives and thoughts became the new normal. From 1801 and thirty years on, England more than doubled its population to 16 ½ million and made technological advances that came to influence previous dogmas. Elizabeth Gaskell was born in 1810 in London into a Unitarian family of eight children. Gaskell lost her mother when she was only one, and Gaskell was sent to her aunt in Knutsford, Cheshire (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 246). In her early twenties, Gaskell met her husband William Gaskell, and they had five children together. Sadly, the fourth child and only son, Willie, died at the age of one, and Gaskell went into a depression. During this period with support from her husband, Gaskell started writing to get over her depression (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 246). Gaskell’s first novel Mary Barton, published in 1848, led her to literary fame. Mary Barton established Gaskell as an accepted author and brought her to the notice of Charles Dickens, and she came to be a writer for his periodical, Household Words (Gaskell 2008, 1). Much like Dickens, Gaskell is famous for her literary social realism, portraying in detail the contemporary society in nineteenth-century England, often with a focus on social classes, injustice, and prejudice. The genre in which Gaskell was active is often referred to as “industrial novel” or “condition-of-England novel.” This new literary genre includes additional famous works of art such as Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley (1849), Disraeli’s Sybil (1845), Alton Locke (1850), and Dickens’ Hard Times (1854). Gaskell’s fourth novel, North and South (1854-5), was originally serialized in Household Words before Dickens had
seen the complete novel (Easson 1980, 30). However, it quickly became one of her best-selling novels and is considered to be a significant piece of Victorian literature.

Similarly to Mary Barton, North and South is an extraordinary example of an industrial novel depicting the injustices and conflicts between social classes. Margaret Hale, the protagonist of North and South, is sent back from her aunt in London to her parents in the small rural village of Helstone. Her father, Mr. Hale, having strong doubts about his beliefs as a vicar, decides to move the family up north to the industrial town of Milton. In Milton, Mr. Hale starts working as a tutor and one of his first students is Mr. Thornton, a wealthy mill owner of Milton. Besides becoming an acquaintance with Mr. Thornton, Margaret also makes friends with a working-class family, the Higgins, and, throughout the novel, one learns to understand the perspectives of society’s different classes.

Gaskell herself hoped that her novels would help to create a better understanding and sympathy from her middle-class readership for the working-class (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 246). Undeniably, Gaskell’s sympathies were with the poor, and her use of the medium of literature was in an effort to make a contemporary social change. With the use of literary methods such as vivid imagery, contrast, realism, and complexity, Gaskell depicts the social environments, injustice, and prejudice of classes. Equally important to Gaskells’ aspirations was the contemporary perception of her credibility. The French novelist Marie-Henri Stendhal called the Victorian novels “a mirror wandering down a road” with emphasis on the mirror as deceptive since the authors employ literary devices to shape their novels (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 22). Stendhal implies that the authors’ attempt to convince us with their characters and events is influenced by the authors’ actual life and therefore it would be more accurate to call it realisms instead of realism (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 22). However, Anthony Burton and Diane Duffy (2020) highlight in their article “Elizabeth Gaskell and the industrial poor: How did she know about them?” the review written by W.R Greg on the subject of Mary Barton’s realism that:

[…] its author has actually lived among the people she describes, made herself intimate at their firesides, and feels a sincere, though sometimes too exclusive and undiscriminating sympathy with them (Burton and Duffy 2020, 1).

Whether or not Gaskell’s depiction of the social classes is deceptive or precise, there is altogether enough evidence of her personal involvement with many social classes and therefore her own perception of them (Burton and Duffy 2020, 21). Earlier scholars
such as Burton and Duffy (2020), Corpron Parker (1997), Anderson and Satalino (2013), and Clausson (2007) have often focused on fictional philanthropy, gender, prejudice, and classes when studying North and South and often compared it with Gaskell’s first novel Mary Barton. Studies have been conducted on specific characters, their characteristics, and the inclusion of religion and movements, often addressing features of realism in order to highlight Gaskell’s own subtextual opinions. Most of the contemporary criticism Gaskell received for Mary Barton was often directed at her radical politics and for being biased (D. Lewis 2010, 89). The British Quarterly Review (1849) explicitly calls it one-sided: “As we have before intimidated, the chief objection which we have to bring against the work is, not that it represents anything to which an actual counterpart may not be found, but that it gives a one-sided picture” (Allon and Vaughan et al. 1849, 132). Critics have also pointed out that the narrative voice itself in Mary Barton had to act as a guide and reporter since it paradoxically was practically free from any middle- or upper-class characters (Nesbit 2020, 153).

The fact that Gaskell belonged to the upper class, met the middle class, and made house visits to the working class enabled her to depict her perception of the classes by using a range of perspectives and contrasts to emphasize the complexity which entails both society and characters in her novel. Because of the critical reviews of Mary Barton, it is my belief that Gaskell tried to be more impartial and unbiased in North and South. By involving a greater complexity, she gives a more nuanced picture of classes and society. In this essay, I argue that Gaskell’s novel North and South uses a range of perspectives and contrasts in order to create complexity in the depiction of the contemporary relationship between industrialism and classes, and that ultimately this is a response to the critique of Mary Barton. This will be done by focusing on the contrast of the mixed genres, the different perspectives of setting and by analysing select characters. Throughout, comparisons will be made to Mary Barton.

The contrast of the mixed genres
In this essay, I find it important to understand the entire novel and its different layers, so before we dive into the individual elements of North and South, I will discuss the contrast arguably present in its generic make-up. As the title of this section implies, North and South could be analysed as belonging to more than one genre. North and South is, as already mentioned, considered to be an industrial novel and is therefore
mostly discussed by scholars in terms of industrialism and classes. However, Nils Clausson (2007, 17-18) analyses the plot of *North and South* in his article “Romancing Manchester: Class, Gender, and the Conflicting Genres,” and argues that Gaskell’s conscious or unconscious choice to tell her story in the form of an “industrial romance,” combining two genres, affected her efficiency to achieve her political and moral intentions. Again, as this essay aims to clarify, Gaskell’s sophisticated writing contains no easy answers, and can therefore be analysed from different perspectives. In relation to the genre of industrial novels, the romance plot of *North and South* should not be overlooked. To define the very fluid genre of romance, one could use Greenblatt’s list of typical characterizations: “It is often characterized by a tripartite structure of social integration, followed by disintegration, involving moral tests and often marvellous events, itself the prelude to reintegration in a happy ending, frequently of marriage and aristocratic social milieux” (Greenblatt et al. 2020, a24). Although some of these characterizations are discussable referring to *North and South*, the novel still meets most of the typical requirements to have its place in the genre of a romance novel. The contemporary emergence of the new genre of industrial novels is, therefore, the second layer to *North and South*, something Gaskell had to incorporate into the older genre of romance (Clausson 2007, 3).

In addition to the generic markers of the typical romance categorizations, the language of the different characters and situations is another tool to identify the different genres. The language describing the unhealthy and depressing conditions of the working class such as “Their nerves are quickened by the hast and bustle and speed of everything around them, to say nothing of the confinement in these pent-up houses, which of itself is enough to induce depression and worry of spirits,” (Gaskell 2012, 364) is an example of realism belonging to the genre of industrial novels (Clausson 2007, 12). Whereas Gaskell’s decision to depict the riot scenes with hyperbolical words and sentences such as “[…] they set up such a fierce unearthly groan”, “[…] that had a ferocious murmur of satisfaction in them” and “[…] with a proud look of defiance on his face, that made him a noble, if not a handsome man” is a language filled with metaphors belonging to the language of romance (Gaskell 2012, 211-213). As Clausson (2007, 12) claims, this scene is primarily a romantic scene about the sexual conflict between Margaret and Thornton, which the conventional language of romanticism reveals.

The combination of generic styles could be interpreted as contributing to the
novel’s realism. Whilst the industrial genre includes features of social realism, romanticism contributes to dramatic realism. I need to acknowledge that this contrast between the industrial novel and the romance novel also exists in *Mary Barton*, but, I would still claim that the romance novel plot in *North and South* has another perspective to it compared to *Mary Barton*, as it is not the typical romance novel plot. Claussson (2007, 4) cites the romance writer Jayne Ann Krentz in his article: “A romance novel plot does not focus on women coping with contemporary social problems and issues” which is exactly what the protagonist Margaret does in *North and South*. Therefore, as has been shown, the contrast of the mixed genres in *North and South* could be understood as a literary method used to give a more complex depiction of the contemporary relationship between industrialism and classes.

**Different perspectives on setting**

The setting could be considered to be a key element in the narrative of a story, and in Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, we are invited to a dark and dirty Manchester. It is not excessive to claim that the absence of different perspectives of Manchester is the consistent description. It is a consistently negative and depressive depiction of Manchester with repetitive keywords such as dark, dirty, smoky, and noisy. However, as I intend to show in this section, in *North and South* there is an additional range of perspectives when portraying the setting of Helstone and an even greater contrast in between the version of that one place. *North and South* has its beginning in London, though only for a chapter, to then transfer us to an idyllic parsonage in Helstone. The setting in *North and South* could be considered as important as the protagonists themselves. Every place represents different characters and classes: the Shaws in London, the Higgins, and Thorntons from Milton, and the Hales from Helstone. Margaret’s love and affection for Helstone becomes obvious through the narration and conversations such as this conversation between Margaret and Captain Lennox: “Helstone is like a village in a poem – in one of Tennyson’s poems. But I won’t try and describe it any more” (Gaskell 2012, 9). Margaret is a part of the educated upper class and surely knows and can refer to Alfred Lord Tennyson and his famous quality of creating scenery and his capacity to link scenery to states of mind (Greenblatt et al. 2018, 144). By referring to Tennyson and a village in his poem, the first perspective of a fairy-tale village has been offered.
In contrast to this fairy-tale depiction of Helstone, Gaskell presents another perspective through Margaret in a situation where she finds herself opposed to Higgins on the subject of him moving to the South: “You must not go to the South,” said Margaret, “for all that. You could not stand it. You would have to be out all weathers. It would kill you with rheumatism” (Gaskell 2012, 369). Being a poor working-class man, Higgins is trying to do everything he can to make sure his only daughter will not starve to death by asking the Hales to mediate a contact in the South so he can get a job. The hopelessness Higgins experiences is reinforced through Gaskell’s way of providing the reader with two perspectives and thus a greater contrast in the depiction of Helstone. Higgins’ imagination after he has heard of the grand South and lived in the hope of a better situation ends with a revelation that the existence of such a place is not real.

Lastly, *North and South* begins by establishing an exquisite, serene lifestyle in a fairy-tale Helstone, where the skies are deep blue, and the pears are perfectly ripe (Gaskell 2012, 29), only to tear down that imagery and replace it with steaming fields filled with poor bent, downcast heads whose brains get robbed of life from the hard spadework (Gaskell 2012, 369). To then once again change our perception of Helstone with “The common sounds of life were more musical there than anywhere else in the whole world, the light more golden, the life more tranquil and full of dreamy delight” (Gaskell 2012, 487). The use of these different perspectives creates an immense contrast between the versions of one place and differs from the description of the setting in *Mary Barton*, where the setting is depicted in terms that consistently continue to be used. In *The British Quarterly Review* (1849) there is also the critique of Gaskell’s depiction of *Mary Barton* as being too generalised: “It may seem paradoxical to say so, but it is nevertheless true, that there is a class of misrepresentations which are mischievous, mainly because actual facts may be met with answering to them. They are such as give exceptional cases as a fair type of the generality” (Allon and Vaughan et al. 1849, 136). These misrepresentations do not necessarily have to allude to the setting, nevertheless, Gaskell receives critique for her generalisation. Hence, these perspectives and elaborate descriptions of Helstone could be interpreted as a response to the critique of *Mary Barton* since it creates a variation rather than generalisation. Moreover, it could also be considered a literary method used in order to create complexity to depict the contemporary relationship between industrialism and classes. Gaskell shows her ability to understand contemporary society and its complicated conditions; there are no simple
answers to the problems. This aligns with Gaskell’s hope to create a better understanding and sympathy for the working class since it contributes an educational dimension to the broad Victorian readership for whom Gaskell composed her works (Anderson and Satalino 2013, 109).

The complexity of the Characters

As has been shown in the two earlier sections, it is not easy to generalize *North and South* only by looking at its complex employment of genre and setting. It is my belief that Gaskell not only wanted to include and depict the upper class in *North and South* due to the criticism she received, but also that she managed to depict all classes of society with greater complexity. This section intends to show how some of the characters in *North and South* possess a greater complexity compared to the equivalent characters and their depiction in *Mary Barton*.

The first character we meet in the novel is the protagonist, Margaret Hale, who is presented and portrayed with some of the typical feminine traits of the time:

Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there – the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour – enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips. (Gaskell 2012, 6)

This passage not only provides us with a typical nineteenth-century description of Margaret, but it also provides us with the first perspective of her as an upper class character. Here in chapter one, we are introduced to Margaret who is living at her aunt Shaw’s residence in London where she has been living for the last ten years. It is obvious how Margaret is attributed with the typical features of a contemporary upper-class gender role, enjoying modelling and the display of dresses. This perspective will later become questioned as Margret is the centre of much of the novel’s different confrontations. Kathleen Anderson and Kelsey Satalino aim to show in their article “An honest up and down fight: Confrontation and social change in North and South” how the confrontation of one’s beliefs produces positive social change, and how “Gaskell suggests that the honest revelation of one’s bias is the essential starting point for personal enlightenment, social reconciliation, and by extension, stronger community”
(2013, 109). I have chosen to understand confrontation as a by-product of different perspectives. Confrontation can include both self-confrontation and public confrontation, and what brings them together is what underlines confrontation, different perspectives. Without different perspectives, I claim there would be no reason to confront different beliefs, feelings, and actions. Correspondingly, Margaret tends to see unfamiliar social groups in derogatory generalizations but is, however, one of the main subjects of confrontation in the novel. She has a very clear idea of which professions are respectable and which are not and looks down on “shoppy people”, butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers (Anderson and Satalino 2013, 118). The implication of these attributes together with Margaret’s feminine appearance described by Mr. Thornton’s first impression of her as “full of a soft feminine defiance” and “with her superb ways of moving and looking” certainly paints a conventional picture of Margaret (Gaskell 2012, 71).

However, one also gets to know another Margaret, displayed with a complexity of characteristics through her thoughts, actions, and confrontations. The first hint of Margaret’s unfeminine energies is when she must tell her mother of her father’s decision to move from Helstone to Milton, due to her father being too cowardly to do it himself. It continues with her rejecting a marriage proposal to then proceed into the navigation of her exiled brothers’ return to England to finally peak in her defence of Mr. Thornton during the riot (Foster 2014, 149). It is a striking example of confrontation when Margaret finds herself with the Thornton’s family locked in their residence in order to flee the raging mob of hostile workers. Observing Thornton’s failed attempts to calm the mob down, she turns to Thornton and says “If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man” (Gaskell 2012, 214). She hastily regrets this as she once again observes Thornton’s failed attempts to calm the mob down, but this time by exposing himself in front of them. Her heroic response is to run out to Thornton to save him by using herself as a shield from the fierce people outside. Evidently, Margaret has both been attributed with the typical features of a contemporary upper-class woman, enjoying modelling and dresses and having clear ideas about “shoppy people”, but also with the heroic bravery of a woman, compared to Thornton’s mother and sister who are hiding inside and are too afraid to face the raging mob. These attributes of a heroine are also to be found in Mary Barton. Mary Barton, the protagonist, first rejects her lover’s hand, and then embarks on a heroic and dangerous journey to Liverpool. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a
difference between the actions of the two protagonists Mary Barton and Margaret Hale, since Margaret focuses on coping with contemporary social problems and issues, and there is also a great difference in their representation of two distinct and different classes.

Although we already have seen a contrast in Margaret’s characterization, there is still more complexity to her character. As already mentioned, Margaret has strong opinions with a posh upper-class attitude towards “shoppy people” and declares to her mother that “[…] I give up the cotton-spinners; I am not standing up for them […]” (Gaskell 2012, 51). Thus, it is rather unexpected when Margaret shows sympathy and care for the poor Higgins family. Pamela Corpron Parker proposes that both Mary Barton and North and South are considered fictional philanthropy novels, that position Gaskell as the “workers’ advocate as she mediates their suffering and presents it for the consumption of her upper- and middle-class readers” (1997, 321). Since North and South is portrayed through the eyes of the upper class, there is more than one way to interpret Margaret’s involvement with the poor, the often held-up example of her egalitarian tendencies, or as a way “to bolster her own sense of class superiority” (Corpron Parker 1997, 329). The relationship with Higgins starts with Margaret’s kindness, giving flowers to the sick Bessy when she is out walking the streets with her father, Nicholas Higgins. Margaret also makes a promise to visit the family, which she fails to keep (Gaskell 2012, 84). The second time Margaret meets Bessy in the streets she gets reminded about her failed promise and therefore wants to atone for her mistake and joins Bessy to her dwelling.

Bessy, being an interesting yet pitiful person, shows strong wishes for death to end her pain and agony, caused by her work as a cotton spinner. Bessy asks Margaret “Do you think such a life as this is worth caring for?” uncovering the working-class misery Margaret has been spared from (Gaskell 2012, 106). The reason for cotton-spinners’ common disease depends on the fluff, small bits that fly off the cotton when carding it, getting into the lungs of the workers and making them cough and spit blood. Bessy Higgins explains to Margaret why mill owners are unwilling to prevent and remove this problem that is killing her:

Some folk have a great wheel at one end o’ their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry of th’ dust; but that wheel costs a deal o’ money- five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit; so it’s but a few of th’ masters as will put ‘em up; and I’ve heard tell o’ men who didn’t like working in places
where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made ‘em hungry, after they’d been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it, and that their wage ought to be raised if they were to work in such places. (Gaskell 2012, 121)

Indeed, this long quotation reveals a horrendous truth about the workers and their conditions. In contrast to this horrendous truth expressed by Bessy, a female cotton worker, we have the example of Margaret’s experience of factory workers. A newly settled Margaret keeps falling into the factory workers leaving work and observes the female factory workers which she illustrates with phrases and words such as “loud laughs and jests” and “the girls with their friendly freedom,” who seems so interested in Margaret that they stop her not only once, but twice, to ask her about the fabric and to touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material (Gaskell 2012, 82). This narrative and choice of words illustrate another dimension of the factory workers: not only the joy, loud laughs, and freedom but also the fact that they seem to be liberated by their work. This obvious contrast between the testimony of a female factory worker compared to Margaret’s experience is yet another example of Gaskell’s way of using multiple perspectives in *North and South*. These multiple perspectives of factory workers could be interpreted as a response to the critique she received in *The British Quarterly Review* “It is another of the omissions of ‘Mary Barton’, that no distinction is drawn between the favourable and the unfavourable circumstances under which factory life may be developed” (Allon and Vaughan et al. 1849, 136). It is of course impossible to know whether Gaskell read this specific critique. However, the general criticism consisted of her “one-sided” depiction of society (Nesbit 2020, 153), which she evidently does not represent in this case.

In comparison and in contrast to the working class there is John Thornton, a successful self-made manufacturer from Milton, attributed with the typical unsympathetic feature of an employer. As a successful self-made millowner, Thornton strongly believes in the will and power of the individual:

> It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks; […] is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character. (Gaskell 2012, 98-99)
Thornton strongly expresses his beliefs about individual duties and efforts, relatable to the idea of survival of the fittest (even if On The Origin Of Species was not released until fourteen years later) which indicates the lack of sympathy towards and separation from his employees. Collen Morrissey takes it further and claims in her journal article that the characterization of Thornton “unearths a social-psychological barrier deeper than a lack of sympathy,” it implies masochism (2019, 240). As the quotation above indicates, Thornton’s belief in natural punishment for the suffering working class due to their failure of sobriety and dishonestly enjoyed pleasures exposes a masochistic moral scheme (Morrissey 2019, 247). Moreover, Thornton demonstrates an incredibly unsympathetic side when refusing poor Higgins work due to him being one of the leaders of the union. Higgins, already imagining this outcome, stresses his real intention “But it’s winter, and th’ childer will clem,” Thornton still refuses to give Higgins work, calls him a knobstick, and says “[…] I say No! to your question. I’ll not give you work. […] Let me pass. I’ll not give you work. There’s your answer” (Gaskell 2012, 388). At this point in the novel, the perspective of a typical unsympathetic millowner has been established.

On the other hand, Gaskell later presents another perspective, and a much more nuanced portrait of Thornton emphasizing moral contrast. Thornton regrets his refusal to Higgins and therefore visits him to offer him a job. There, Thornton realizes Higgins’ intentions were true, and by some spell, “it touches the latent tenderness of his heart” (Gaskell 2012, 393). Later in the novel, we get to understand that this happening, this experience and involvement with the poor working class deeply affected Thornton into becoming a better man, a “good” Thornton:

And by-and-by, he lost all sense of resentment in wonder how it was, or could be, that two men like himself and Higgins, living by the same trade, working in their different ways at the same object, could look upon each other’s position and duties in so strangely different a way. And thence arose that intercourse, which thought it might not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion and action, when the occasion arose, would, at any rate, enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly. (Gaskell 2012, 511)

From the above, it is clear that Thornton is depicted as a character with an ambiguous moral attitude toward the relationship between industrialism and classes. Additionally,
Thornton is also presented as a man with a great contrast in his feelings toward Margaret. Early in the novel, Thornton expresses his feelings towards Margaret as “[…] he was vexed at the state of feeling between himself and her” (Gaskell 2012, 143). We learn that through hard independent work, Thornton has acquired great wealth as a mill owner and is therefore convinced he needs no one – “and certainly not an uppity, intelligent, verbally combative woman like Margaret” (Clausson 2007, 9). It is once again the riot scene that strengthens Thornton’s loving feelings for Margaret and makes him take the decision to “put myself at her feet – if it were but one chance in a thousand – or a million- I should do it” (Gaskell 2012, 228). Thornton, being a man of his word confronts Margaret after the riot but gets rejected in a very clear but icy tone. Thus, it becomes normal for Thornton to fall back into the old resentment of feelings, making statements that he believes women are at the “bottom of every plague in this world” (Gaskell 2012, 388). This is of course not the end of the romance plot in the novel, as Clausson (2007, 16) notes, Margaret’s rejection depends on Thornton’s moral standard.

Additionally, one gets to witness another perspective of Thornton, when he finally adopts Margaret’s moral standard with regard to the workers. More specifically, the key point for Thornton’s change intertwines both the relationship between classes and romance. I claim that Gaskell once again has attributed the character of Thornton, an employer, with a complexity that was not presented in Mary Barton regarding the upper class. The two most prominent characters representing the upper class in Mary Barton are Mr. Carson and his son Harry Carson. The Carsons are attributed with the typical unsympathetic upper-class moral, and as Corpron Parker claims “The Carson family serves as Gaskell’s primary example of the moral failure of wealthy industrialists” (1997, 327). That Gaskell only incorporated and unjustly depicted a few upper-class characters is not only my and Corpron Parker’s (1997) opinion. The British Quarterly Review highlights this specific simplicity of the upper-class characters in their criticism “[…] the only millowners introduced are Barton’s old employer, who is represented very much in the character of a dishonest bankrupt, and the two Carsons – arrogant, selfish, unfeeling men, with no care for anything but their own aggrandizement. […] that to exhibit a caricature, which they cannot but know that the majority of their readers will accept as a portrait, is nothing less than an act of dishonesty, […]” (Allon and Vaughan et al. 1849,132). By narrating through and depicting the upper-class perception of factory workers, industrialism and classes in
North and South, this biased criticism is no longer applicable to North and South. Contrariwise, one could possibly argue that the working class is not represented quite as much throughout the novel.

To further understand the role of characterisation and character complexity, this section will analyse Margaret’s older brother, Fredrick Hale. Early in the novel (2012, 15) we learn through Margaret that her older brother was involved in a naval mutiny six or seven years ago. Therefore, Fredrick never returned to the family in fear of being punished and has since been a fugitive living overseas in exile. It is important to understand the seriousness of mutiny in the historical context of the nineteenth century, an offense most often giving the mutineers the death penalty (D. Lewis 2010, 92-93). Gaskell includes this feature of realism, and we discover that Fredrick has a death penalty waiting for him, and his fellow mutineers were hung at the yard arm (Gaskell 2012, 130). It is questionable how a mutineer could be portrayed as good, but through letters, we get to know that Fredrick is innocent and that “it probably was – a statement of Captain Reid’s imperiousness in trifles, very much exaggerated by the narrator, who had written it while fresh and warm from the scene of altercation” (Gaskell 2012, 127). Gaskell justifies Fredrick and the sailors’ actions by highlighting the death of a sailor, violence, and flogging practiced by their tyrant, Captain Reid. As Michael D. Lewis suggests, Fredrick’s action on the behalf of others, standing up for others, could be considered a key aspect of the novel, just as Higgins does for the starving kids (2010, 99). The information above would not be interesting nor contribute anything to my claim if there was not another perspective of Fredrick.

In comparison to Fredrick’s previous portrayal as an innocent man with brave actions, later events will call into question this innocent depiction. Shortly after Fredrick’s return to England, the servant of Hales, Dixon, runs into an acquainted man from the South. This man, Leonards, informs Dixon that he wants to turn Fredrick in for the mutiny in order to claim the reward. When Dixon later refers to Leonards, she describes him “as great a scamp as ever lived- who plagued his father almost to death” (Gaskell 2012, 304). The negative description of Leonards continues and at the railway station he is described as “a bad-looking man, who seemed to have drunk himself into a state of brutality […]” (Gaskell 2012, 317). Like the earlier narrative of the mutiny, in which Captain Reid is depicted as a tyrant, Leonards is demonized and repeatedly placed in a negative light (D. Lewis 2010, 105). Later, Leonards has an altercation with Fredrick and gets pushed down on the railroad. At first, it looks like Fredrick’s violence
has caused Leonards’ death, only to later be blamed on Leonards’ excessive drinking habits. Whether it is Leonards’ drinking habits or not that kills him is up to the reader to interpret, since no more details are provided regarding his death.

Accordingly, at this point in the novel, the reader has been offered two different perspectives of Fredrick. The innocent man with brave actions and the fugitive now also wanted for manslaughter. I have chosen Fredrick as an example because although Fredrick is part of a seemingly minor plot in the novel, he still provides much of the novel’s suspense and energy and is likewise a character portrayed with complexity (D. Lewis 2010, 97). This type of two-sided complexity is present throughout the novel, and represents impartiality, regardless the characters’ class affiliation. Another interesting difference between the novels is found in the victims: in North and South, this poor addicted working-class man Leonards and in Mary Barton, Harry Carson, a wealthy upper-class person. Michael D. Lewis (2010, 89) argues in his article “Mutiny in the public sphere” that the naval subplot of Fredrick in North and South is the expression of Gaskell’s contemporary political criticism, whereas John Barton is commonly understood as the symbol of political radicalism in Mary Barton. This essay does not focus on Gaskell’s subtextual political intentions, but rather the differences between the novels and a possible explanation to why she decided to narrate through the lens of the upper class, if her sympathies were with the poor. Therefore, when Michael D. Lewis (2010, 89) cites earlier criticism in his article: “Her first novel’s sympathy for the working class, in general, and for the quasi-heroic murderer John Barton, in particular, led W.R. Greg, to describe the novel as ‘mischievous in the extreme’” it can further support my argument that Gaskell added a complex dimension to North and South in order to be impartial, and that ultimately this as a response to the critique of Mary Barton.

Conclusion
This essay has highlighted the complexity of North and South by focusing on the different perspectives of genre, setting and select characters and by comparing it with Mary Barton. I have used one first-hand source expressing contemporary (1849) criticism of Mary Barton, but I have also referenced journal articles where the conventional conclusion about the criticism has supported my first-hand source. It is my belief that Gaskell, in some way, obtained some of the contemporary criticism of
Mary Barton, and therefore tried to be more impartial by attributing the upper class with a more complex portrayal in North and South. As shown above, Gaskell does not only attribute the upper-class characters with complex characteristics, but also the working-class characters. This is often accomplished by introducing one perspective, to then introduce another, to finally jump back and forth between the perspectives, thus creating a multidimensional effigy of nineteenth-century society and its individuals. By using this literary method Gaskell not only provides the reader with a broader understanding of her contemporary society, but it is also a method used to question everything. There is no single institution, authority or character in the novel which is not questioned by being viewed from different perspectives. As previously referenced, Anderson and Satalino (2013) have discussed the characters’ perspectives in terms of confrontation. The novel is filled with different confrontations, both public confrontation and self-confrontation. Thornton, who has been presented as a man with both public confrontation (riot) and self-confrontation (employer-employee) is a great example of how these confrontations eventually lead to reconciliation (Easson 1980, 40). An even more comprehensive concept is industrial reconciliation, including the contemporary injustices connected to classes and work conditions. Through Thornton, Gaskell suggests that one’s pride must be overcome in order to achieve industrial reconciliation, by asserting these conceptions of individual haughtiness, “one can instigate positive social change” (Anderson and Satalino 2013, 124).

The great question is, why would an already accepted writer for Household Words need to adapt her work to the taste of her critics? One possible explanation is given by Greenblatt (2018, 246) and mentioned in my introduction, the fact that Gaskell herself hoped that her novels would help to create a better understanding and sympathy from her middle-class readership for the working-class. Although the fictional philanthropy is more prominent in Mary Barton, with a lot of focus on individual philanthropic gestures, North and South implies a more complex solution towards the injustices of industrialism. Corpron Parker claims that the essence of Gaskell’s fictional philanthropy in North and South “suggests that individual philanthropic gestures must be balanced by ethical business practices, that social and economic reform go hand in hand” (1997, 330). This is most evident towards the end of the novel when Thornton realises “Once brought face to face, man to man, with and individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognize that ‘we have all of us one human
heart” (Gaskell 2012, 510). Gaskell argues that the “concerns of industry and the home are interconnected and of vital interest to both men and masters, rich and poor, men and women” (Corpron Parker 1997, 330).

Consequently, I have had no intentions of disparaging Mary Barton as a less well-written novel, it is still a fantastic novel with complex characters and an exciting poignant plot. My intention has been to show how Gaskell’s fourth novel, North and South, is more impartial by including a greater range of perspectives both within characters and within society, this as a response to the critique she received for Mary Barton. It is safe to say that the critique of Mary Barton for being biased and general is not applicable to North and South. Gaskell provides no easy answers in North and South, and everything she presents is ultimately questioned or presented from another perspective. Both novels are about changes, and both show how we theoretically and practically can achieve these ultimately positive changes for our society. In that sense, I would be bold enough to call North and South a timeless novel still applicable in a majority of countries today.
Reference list

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